



## THE BENEFACTOR OF SANTA CLARA

DECIO ZYLBERSZTAJN

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW MCDUGALL

*Red dress:* Solange treaded lightly. She was careful not to make a sound with her steps, not to move a stone from its place nor a single fallen leaf on the path. But she could not remain incognito as she passed by the bar from where she was observed, top to bottom, inside out, by the three regulars. They knew every one of the dresses she had tacked and sown, designed to cover her legs and leave only her ankles on show.

“Twenty-eight, maybe thirty,” guessed one.

“Thirty? Away! She must be over forty,” another argued.

The third just watched on, keeping his comments to himself. On that morning, the ritual had followed its standard procedure. The cachaça glasses were set down on the bar and silence fell when Solange passed on the opposite side of the road, on her way to the women’s clothing shop. Dark, curvaceous, but with slender ankles. Her body insisted on standing out in even the most modest outfits, much to the audience’s delight.

Solange entered the shop, then re-emerged accompanied by a sales assistant. They looked at the display window and she pointed out a red dress with a blue rose on the waist. She entered the shop, remained there a while and then left, returning the way she came. As she passed the bar, the loudspeaker on the church tower announced the death of a local resident. The three observers removed their hats and held them by their chests in a brief mark of respect, that lasted only until Solange had gone. Their glasses were set on the bar again, while thoughts flowed with freedom and impunity.

Three days later, at the same time, when the sun still hadn’t had time to warm the stone street, Solange again walked past the three glasses sitting on the bar, already half-full of cachaça, still stepping discretely, with a black skirt covering her legs and ambling along in her usual manner. She went in to the shop, stayed inside for fifteen minutes and, smiling, returned in the opposite direction, clutching a large package. The glasses shook in the men’s hands as Solange went by on her way home. Her walk had changed style, now a more rhythmic movement, feet crossing as if on a catwalk. On her lips, a smile. Her black dress, the same one as every day, seemed even tighter than usual. On passing, Solange looked inside the bar, surprising the three men. Like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar, they tried, unsuccessfully, to disguise that they had been watching her and raised their hats in greeting. As soon as Solange was out of sight of the bar, all three necked their cachaças.



*Going up the mountain:* The car crossed the road and headed up the mountain towards the town of Santa Clara. The dirt track and the dryness of July caused the dust to hover before settling at the side of the road. At the wheel, Doctor Ivo repeated the manoeuvres he had performed monthly since he began attending to the people of the village tucked into the mountains of Minas Gerais.

It all started when the newly-qualified dental surgeon returned to Piranguinho, his hometown, where he opened a clinic, with focused and conditional paternal support. A farmer with many heads of cattle, Otaviano, Ivo's father, secured him a more than respectable start in the profession. The son quickly understood the arrangement's implied dependency, but he did not show dissatisfaction, preferring passive convenience to a confrontation with old Otaviano. Everything pointed to a promising future for the liberal professional, who was also heir to some dairy and coffee farms.

The link with Santa Clara was mere chance. One of the few friends from his university days invited him to spend a few days in a small place by the Mantiqueira mountains, from where the valley of the Sapucaí river could be seen, nestled under the low winter clouds. There he discovered Santa Clara, where he resolved to establish a clinic to attend to the underprivileged community, which would build his reputation among the valley dwellers.

As he set to it, Ivo recalled the years spent in that building on Rua Três Rios, where the University of São Paulo's odontology department was based. "Where will my peers from the student residence be now? The ones with whom I shared those years of youth and Paulistano bohemianism, all of us with the same Minas Gerais roots."

Ivo was a student of reserved habits, in stark contrast to his classmates, regular frequenters of the low-budget red-light district on Aurora, Gusmões and Andradas streets. He opted for a regimented life of study, a trace of something inherited from his father for whom honour lay in winning and getting ahead. Otaviano didn't hold with revelry or waste, either of time or money. It was by turn a remnant of his own father's childhood, the son of Italian immigrants who came to grow coffee, first as employees and later as owners of a small dairy and coffee farm in Minas Gerais. That little farm grew and multiplied into numerous productive properties.

His almost monastic seclusion did not make Ivo a brilliant student. On the contrary, his exam results were rather mediocre. Lacking either academic brilliance or a bohemian geniality, his isolation turned him into a person with few friends. For Ivo, São Paulo meant freedom from the family yoke, to which he would return



voluntarily years later. On the other hand, the city had a leaden atmosphere, with military tanks roaming the streets and the disappearances of active members of the student movement.

Fleeing Minas Gerais served for little. Ivo replaced the domestic harness with the reins of the dictatorship. He became complicitly comfortable in the paternalism that settled over the country. Without the desired freedom or independence, he completed his studies. Long gone the good life of the countryside, where he combined chasing after young maidens with his experiences at Anita's, the respectable woman who ran the brothel with the necessary diligence to shield it from the world's evils, all that remained was to face up to working life. He would look after teeth, mouths, jaws, he would make prophylaxes, he would treat gum disease and make thousands of plugs and dentures.

A grown man, he inherited the land and bank accounts of his father, who only stopped making demands after his death. Now, Ivo headed up the mountain on the earthy road, years after his graduation as a dental surgeon where the guest speaker was a military minister who in a three-hour talk expounded upon the wonders and miracles the Brazilians were building.

"Never in the history of this country have we been so happy. The income of Brazilians and with it the demand for dental services will increase and you will have a secure future with ninety-million mouths to look after," the military minister had loudly proclaimed.

Ivo recalled the applause that followed.

Decades later, Ivo was on the road, just as he was every last Friday of the month. The benevolent doctor, well-liked by all, was given an award by the Santa Clara town council. The constancy with which he conducted his business surprised the local residents, who were amazed by it. Rain or shine, there was the doctor dealing with the mouths of the community for a nominal fee, most often simply a thank-you. Ivo knew the daily miseries of the people of Santa Clara at least as well as the parish priest. In the town's annual celebrations, he received a certificate of gratitude for his services to the community and was now distinguished with the title of Honorary Citizen, the first such recognition handed out by the town council.

Doctor Ivo had only to climb the mountain to leave mediocrity behind and take the path towards glory.

*Aphrodite:* When the car rounded the last bend and breached the city entrance, the church bell rang five times. "The sun sets early at this time of year, behind the pine forests which stand firm against the ravenous



onslaught of the sawmill,” mused Doctor Ivo, who drove gladly towards the town with the aim of being recognised by the residents of little Santa Clara. On the way, he stopped the car when he saw Zé da Neca and let him know he had brought his denture, ready to be tried on. He called out to him from the car.

“Come by the clinic before eight o’clock, don’t forget, make an appointment with Carmem.”

He went uphill towards the church square. He looked and looked, but he couldn’t see any trace of the statue of Aphrodite. “It seems they have removed Aphrodite from her place in the middle of the square.” He thought back to when he had commissioned the statue from an artist friend with the intention of donating it to the town. He wanted the hair flowing down to the waist, the arms raised, a transparent veil should cover one breast and trail down her body until covering part of her pubic hair, and he insisted she have pronounced, shapely buttocks. He wanted the statue to exude luxury and sensuality. The artist had achieved this, but where was his Aphrodite?

He parked the car next to the church and continued towards the clergy house, where he found Father Lucas, a young priest new to the town.

“Hello, father! How’s your work for the people of this parish going?”

“Well, my son, lots to do and few resources. Perhaps you might be inclined to make a donation.”

Ivo took this opportunity to inquire after the statue.

“I have made donations. For example, I donated a sculpture of Aphrodite to the town.

You wouldn’t happen to know where the statue, which was in the centre of the square, has ended up, would you?”

The priest gazed into the empty space where statue had been and replied.

“My son, folk are saying that the mayor didn’t like the statue because it showed the breasts of a pagan god. Just between us,” he leaned in towards Ivo’s ear, “there’s talk that the mayor sucked at the teat of the government and that folk have named the statue after his wife.”



Doctor Ivo pretended to understand, bid farewell to the priest and continued in the direction of the town hall, looking for Dona Antônia's daughter Carmem, who handled the telephone. He entered the small room without knocking. Startled, Carmem hid the book she was holding under the desk and greeted the doctor, who asked her to call all of his scheduled patients. Carmem promised to make the calls right away. On leaving, Ivo bumped into the mayor, who embraced him, slapping his shoulders like an old friend. The doctor, still riled, took the opportunity to ask him:

"Mayor, if you don't mind me asking, would you happen to have any idea where the statue of Aphrodite has gotten to, the one I donated to the town?"

"Statue? Ah, yes, the statue. Didn't they take that down? I heard it was the priest's doing, as he reckoned it had nothing to do with the faith of the folk round here. People are saying the priest thought it pornographic. I think he ordered the removal of the thing from the square. I can have someone find out, open an enquiry, if you deem it necessary. . ."

The chimneys and rooftops of the houses created a pleasant scene, combining with the smell of woodfires burning at full blaze. Ivo's stomach cried out for lunch to be served by Dona Antônia, in whose house, in the back room, the clinic was located. For housing the clinic, Dona Antônia enjoyed a certain status within the local community, as well as free dental treatment, and Carmem even earned a little loose change doing odd jobs for the doctor.

Ivo stopped his car outside the small house and got out. He stretched his legs and went inside calling for Dona Antônia, who ran to greet him.

"Dona Antonia, what happened to the statue in the square?"

"I don't know, but I know folk are talking about it. Some think it's a good thing, the disappearance of that woman with her bare breasts, big backside and shameless face. Some began saying that the mayor sucks at the teat of the budget and they named the sculpture after the first lady. Others saw it as an attack on the town's memory. Everyone has a different story, I don't know. I only know that I made a nice lunch to fill you up before starting work. Shall we sit at the table?"

"But where has Aphrodite gotten to?" thought Ivo as he inspected the clinic before sitting down to eat.



*The clinic:* Doctor Ivo surveyed his clinic, concerned with its sterility. The dentist's chair was cast iron and dated from 1940, more reminiscent of a barber's chair. The leather-upholstered upper worn with age, the backrest with two settings for the patient's comfort. For the head, two supports like headphones, only tighter. The armrest was wooden. To the patient's right-hand side was a small table with round buttons and dials with hands which once moved for working the equipment. In place of drills, holes. A few unworking knobs and stiff switches made up the rest of what had been a control panel. A vertical arm held an incandescent lamp, without any kind of screen to protect the patient's eyes. A second arm ended in a platform for laying the instruments on. The third arm supported a round plastic container which sometimes served as a spittoon, fed by a thin spout fixed onto a tap which dripped constantly. By the sink, a gas lamp heated a metal bowl of water for sterilising the instruments.

There were two sockets fashioned into the wall and an iron window frame with dull glass panes. The window allowed a blurry image of the people outside. If open, it gave a view of the garden and orchard, where the top of a grand lemon tree stood out, which although in the neighbouring garden insisted on bearing fruit on this side of the wall. The remaining furniture consisted of two laminated tables, the sofa-bed the dedicated Doctor rested on and a side table for Carmem, Dona Antônia's daughter who organised the patient files.

Ivo was checking his equipment was ready for use when he heard Dona Antônia's call.

"Doctor Ivo, the lunch table is set."

The patients: The patients answered Carmem's call. They soon arrived outside Dona Antônia's house. Carmem helped to arrange a queue that began in the passageway flanking the house and continued into the street. Some patients came from far away, from the region's remote farms, most were simple folk for whom Doctor Ivo was their only healthcare. The quality of the work and the state of the equipment was of little importance, what they really wanted was to meet the doctor. The condition of the tools allowed, at best, the performance of superficial extractions and fillings. Dentures Ivo would have made in another town, when the patient could afford it. There wasn't a working manual drill that would let him carry out restorations. He knew that nothing could substitute the relief of the pliers for the toothache sufferer. Extractions were what he did most. Work began straight after lunch. The files would be prepared and organised by Carmem's hand. Arriving to his station, Ivo asked in his predictable ritual,

"Everything in order with the files?"



“As always, doctor,” replied Carmem.

“How many patients do we have today?”

“We have six. I don’t know if there will be time to see all of them.”

“Time can be found, Carmem. Give me the names.”

“Let me see. Dom Cantídio, Dona Veridiana, Dom José Lúcio, Dom Benedito Costa da Maninha, Dom Zé da Neca and,” she whispered the last one, “Dona Solange Araújo.”

“Ah, Dona Solange is on the list? I’m not sure I heard right.”

“Yes, Solange Araújo,” replied Carmem, arranging the files and thinking “I could do with being the last patient,” before adding, “I put her file last, as I always do.”

“Excellent. Now, let’s get to work.”

*Black dress, red dress:* Solange made the journey from her house to the clinic. On passing the bar, she was seen by the three usual observers.

“Where’s she off to in such a hurry, carrying that package?” the first commented.

“She doesn’t seem in a rush, she looks flustered. I think we’ve seen that package before,” the second replied.

The third, noting the direction she was heading, weighed in.

“She is going to see the doctor. To sort out some pain or other.”

Solange reached Dona Antônia’s house wearing the black dress that came down below her shins, the aforementioned package in her arms. The penultimate patient was still being seen to and Carmem sat at the desk, reading a book propped on her lap. Distracted, she didn’t register Solange’s presence.



“Reading for literature class?” asked Solange. Carmem, in a swift motion, shut the book and shoved it under a pile of papers on the desk. “Can I see the book?” asked Solange.

“No, it’s not for Portuguese class, it was a gift from someone,” said Carmem.

“I’ve come straight from work and I didn’t have time to change. Can I use the bathroom?”

“Of course, I’ll just check it’s all okay in there,” Carmem stepped out of the room a moment, long enough for Solange to lift the papers and see the hidden book. Carmem took some things out the bathroom and returned to her post. “You can use it now, all clear.”

Solange took her package and went to the bathroom, from where she emerged wearing the red dress with a blue flower at the waist and an opening on the side, revealing her thigh with every step she took. Carmem gazed in astonishment.

“I like the colour and the flower on the waist. I think whoever sees you will like it. You can go on in now, Zé da Neca has been seen to,” said Carmem, “Oh, on the way out you can use the bathroom to change,” she added with a wry smile.

“Thanks, dear. Oh, I liked the book you’re reading, of all of Dalton Trevisan’s, that’s the one I like best, *A Polaquinha*.”

As soon as Solange went into the clinic, Carmem ran to her room. Doctor Ivo arranged his instruments and carefully adjusted the headrest on the chair. When he saw her, he knocked the already-sterilised tools onto the floor.

“Good evening, Dona Solange. Have you been waiting long?”

“No, doctor. No more than usual,” she replied without directly meeting his gaze.

“Would you like to take a seat?” asked Ivo, looking at Solange’s dress, barely containing the woman’s flesh.

With measured steps, Solange approached the chair. Her movements suggested a certain intimacy. Everything was familiar. Solange’s slow movements didn’t match with her wheezing breath which flushed





her cheeks. Upon sitting down, the red dress revealed her thigh, which she was slow to cover up, feigning an effort while settling into the chair. The large flower on her waist hindered Ivo's approach with the sterilised instruments.

Ivo tried to focus on the job, but he couldn't steady his shaking hands, letting the tools crash to the floor for a second time. Without exchanging a word with Solange, he went about her treatment, she letting out the occasional complaint or short, sharp cry of pain. Ivo asked permission, removed the blue flower and unbuttoned Solange's dress. He trembling, she panting, their gazes, breathing, bodies, meeting, leaving silence in their wake, only broken by the clinking of metal and the dripping of the tap.

From the wrought-iron framed window with translucent glass, it was possible to make out the figure of Ivo, bent over Aphrodite, working quietly.